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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANTO DOMINGO 001513

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KJUS](#) [DR](#)  
SUBJECT: THE DR'S REFORMISTA PARTY - A PHOENIX OR DEAD  
DUCK? (PART I)

SANTO DOMI 00001513 001.2 OF 003

11. (SBU) Summary: The Social Christian Reform Party (PRSC), once the powerful political instrument of President Balaguer, is struggling to rise again after it received less than five percent of the vote during the May 2008 elections. The party is split

in various ways and several nominal members of the PRSC actually serve in the PLD party-led Fernandez administration (e.g. Foreign Minister Morales Troncoso). The party is in the process of selecting both a new party president and a new secretary general, but there seems little consensus on just what the party stands for. Unless the party can overcome internal differences, develop sound policies and - in municipalities where it is in power - demonstrate that it can produce results, the DR will lack the sort of coherent opposition party it needs to keep from slipping into a semi-democracy under President Fernandez. With the second largest party, the PRD, having lost the last three elections by wide margins, the DR could benefit from an effective third party option. However, only time will tell if the PRSC - whose symbol is a rooster - ends up a phoenix or dead duck. End Summary.

Tough Times for the PRSC  
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12. (U) Ordinary Dominicans often express their disgust with politicians and political parties in the country. Recently, while riding through Santo Domingo in a taxi, Poloff noted a small building with the colors and logo of a hitherto unnoticed minor party. The taxi driver, upon being asked what kind of party it was, laughed contemptuously and said, "Who knows? They just exist to get money from the electoral system." This raised questions about how soon the once powerful PRSC might join the ranks of the DR's many small and obscure parties. If the PRSC does, what will the future of Dominican democracy be?

13. (U) Once, the PRSC was the party of "the last caudillo," President Joaquin Balaguer, who ruled from 1966-1978 and 1986-1996. Since Balaguer's death in 2002, the PRSC's fortunes have steadily ebbed, even though the party accumulated vast resources (real estate, cars, cash) while in power. In the last presidential elections (May 2008), the PRSC's candidate, Amable Aristy Castro, received less than five percent of the vote. In part, this was because many PRSC members supported the PLD's Leonel Fernandez, joining a movement called "Fernandez on the First Round." The confused state of the party continues.

15. (U) Moreover, in recent years, President Fernandez managed to get some important PRSC figures to join his team. These include the Foreign Minister, Morales Troncoso, Angel Lockwood, Minister without Portfolio (and soon to be

Ambassador to Colombia), and Aristides Fernandez Zucco, who heads the National Energy Commission. Recently, a supposedly secret meeting at the Presidential Palace between President Fernandez and certain PRSC congressmen caused the PRSC leadership to cry foul. PRSC loyalists claim the meeting, which was uncovered by the media, was yet another naked attempt by the President to seduce PRSC members into serving his administration, thereby splitting the party. Certainly, since the last elections there have been defections of PRSC representatives in Congress, reducing their number from 22 to 18, plus two Senators.

#### Inside the PRSC: Clueless and Leaderless, but Feisty

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¶6. (SBU) In Poloff's recent meetings with mid-ranking and young members of the PRSC, two trends emerged: First, there as a strong desire for the PRSC to revitalize itself. Second, these party activists had no concrete ideas about what the PRSC should be doing or saying to regain public support. Indeed, Poloff was struck by what seemed to be their inability to explain just why anyone should vote for the PRSC. Rather than setting out the party's track-record of achievements, or its proposals to address the major issues facing the country, they mostly wished to complain about being out of power and about the use of state assets by Fernandez during his recent election campaign.

¶7. (SBU) Rather more revealing was Poloff's meeting in early September with the man currently stepping down as President of the PRSC, Federico "Quique" Antun Batlle. Antun is a veteran of the PRSC, having worked for the party and served in the Congress for many of the last thirty years. He said he was leaving the PRSC presidency and politics because he is "tired of pushing against a wall."

SANTO DOMI 00001513 002.2 OF 003

¶8. (C) Antun bluntly said that President Fernandez is trying to destroy the PRSC and that corruption is worse than before.

He added that members of the party who have joined the Fernandez administration have done so "for their own, not national, interests." Antun sees the importance of an effective opposition party in the maintenance of democracy, but warned that Fernandez "is trying to become a permanent President." Saying history will judge Fernandez, Antun believes that over the long-run Fernandez's efforts to accumulate power will come to naught, or worse.

¶9. (C) Warming to the topic of corruption and social disintegration, Antun noted that under Balaguer someone might seek to have a contract steered to an up-and-coming businessperson and that there might be a tacit understanding that that person would either provide a small kick-back or at least otherwise support the PRSC in return. Now, Antun claimed, people "no longer need to be sophisticated" and baldly demand 10 percent or more. He added bitterly that his children are staying in the United States because they see no future here and are repulsed by the way narco-traffickers warp society. For instance, he said "in the discos, girls will only leave with the guys whose drug money allows them to have fancy cars."

¶10. (C) (Note: Since meeting with Poloff, Antun sent President Fernandez a letter setting forth his critiques. In stinging language, he accuses the President of violating various laws, permitting corruption and endangering democracy in the DR. Antun tells Fernandez, "You have no right to trample on our people as you are doing. The government's resources should not be looted by vulgar clientelism, (thus) emulating the most enraging and unstable despotic practices of Latin America." End note.)

¶11. (SBU) Poloff also met with Amable Aristy Castro, the PRSC presidential candidate in 2008, on the day he announced he

would seek the post of president of the PRSC. Aristy was much more circumspect than Antun. His essential message was that the PRSC "can and will strengthen itself." Referring to the numerous splits in the PRSC, he praised Hillary Clinton for having delivered a solid concession speech, despite the hard-fought primary season, saying, "That's real democracy." Although the subject of many rumors about corruption himself, Aristy - his eyes unblinking - said corruption must be addressed.

¶12. (SBU) Aristy indicated that the PRSC could play watchdog role, despite Fernandez's currently overwhelming political position. Aristy is also aware of the worrisome skepticism among ordinary Dominicans about the political class - of which he remains a long-standing and powerful member. He did not, however, spell out how he would deal with corruption or other pressing issues in the country.

¶13. (U) Before the media, Aristy had much the same message - that the party should reunify, and that leaders of the party were looking to him to make it happen. He added that he would not seek the fusion of the PRSC with any other party. Aristy also claimed that he does not intend to run again for DR president when national elections are held in 2012. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Morales Troncoso told reporters that Aristy was the man who could guarantee the party's survival and blamed its decline on Antun.

PRSC: What next?

¶14. (U) The PRSC will select its new president, and secretary general, on October 26. In addition to Amble Aristy, Victor "Ito" Bisono is seeking the party presidency. Bisono currently represents the National District (Santo Domingo) in the Congress. Born in 1963, he joined the party's youth wing early and, in addition to being a representative, has worked as a businessman, serving as President of the Council for Promoting Foreign Investment at one point. He thus is much younger than Aristy and so might provide the party with a more modern image. Bisono has said that he wants the PRSC to have "its own identity" - precisely because the PRSC is seen as partly subsumed by the ruling PLD. He claims that the country wants the PRSC to "relaunch" itself and to open itself to "the new values of Dominican society" and Dominican youth and women.

¶15. (C) As for Bisono's chances, Antun believes that Bisono would make a better Secretary General of the party than president because Bisono is seen as a good organizer, but

SANTO DOMI 00001513 003.2 OF 003

perhaps not as gregarious a party president ought to be. Antun opined that Joaquin Ricardo might be the next PRSC president (Ricardo was briefly Minister of Foreign Affairs in the early 1990's but has not been very active in public since). Others believe that Aristy, because he has the most money, will win the contest.

Comment: PRSC - The Once and Future Party?

¶16. (C) Comment: At this moment in Dominican history, Fernandez almost completely dominates the fragmented political scene. This may be why the President, fresh from his second consecutive inauguration, has just put forward an extensive series of constitutional amendments (to be analyzed septel). At the same time, one has the sense that the political situation is delicately poised. On the one hand, Antun's strong letter to the President shows that the DR remains free enough that a man can speak his mind to the country's leader. On the other, the fact that that his letter implies Fernandez may become like the Emperor Nero -

"for whose bad acts, posterity (now) regards as a by-word for wickedness" - indicates the level of concern some have in the country.

¶17. (C) Comment (cont'd.): References to Nero may seem over-blown, but the DR could benefit from an effective opposition party. The Foreign Minister has signaled as much himself, even though he is a prime example of cooptation by Fernandez of PRSC members. The danger is that the Fernandez administration, lacking the stimulus of vigorous yet mature opposition, will drift into ineffectual, semi-authoritarian, and/or corrupt torpor. This would not be in U.S. interests. Post will continue to address the challenge through its significant democracy and governance programs.

¶18. (SBU) Comment (cont'd.): Certainly, there is plenty the PRSC could start to do: Spell out how, once in power, it would address the threat from narco-trafficking, the country's dependency on imported oil, and improve the national education system. It could also work to ensure that, in municipalities it does control, it keeps the streets free of trash and otherwise ensures the provision of basic services. Then, if/as Fernandez's infrastructure projects run behind schedule and over-budget, the PRSC would be well-positioned to reap political benefits. So far, the contestants for PRSC leadership roles have yet set out such a vision. Moreover, if the next PRSC president is Aristy - the man who led the party to electoral disaster earlier this year - this would signal that the PRSC is not yet ready to play the sort of role the DR needs over the next four years. End Comment.  
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